



Indiana State Department of Health

Epidemiology Resource Center

Quick Facts

About...Shingles (Herpes Zoster)

What is Shingles?

Shingles is caused by a reactivation of varicella zoster virus, the same virus that causes chickenpox. After having chickenpox, the virus lies in a dormant state in certain nerve cells of the body and then reactivates, causing shingles (also called herpes zoster). Reactivation of the virus can occur more than once. Only people who have had chickenpox can develop shingles. The elderly and people with weakened immune systems are at risk for more severe disease.

How is shingles spread?

Shingles cannot be transmitted from person to person; however, a person who has never had chickenpox or is not immune to the disease through vaccination can develop chickenpox through direct contact with the fluid from shingles lesions. A person can no longer spread the virus once the shingles lesions crust over. Covering the site of infection with a dry, adhesive bandage can minimize the spread of the virus.

Who is at risk for shingles?

Anyone who has had chickenpox is at risk for shingles. Shingles is more common in people age 50 years and older and in people who have weakened immune systems.

How do I know if I have shingles?

You may have shingles if you experience a very painful rash that follows lines along the body, with lesions resembling chickenpox (fluid-filled spots, or raised red bumps). If you have never had chickenpox, you cannot get shingles.

What are the symptoms of shingles?

The first symptom of shingles is a burning pain or tingling and extreme sensitivity, usually only on one area of the skin. This may be present for 1-3 days before a red rash appears. Fever and headache may occur. The rash soon turns into groups of blisters that look similar to chickenpox and typically does not itch. The blisters generally last for two to three weeks.

How is shingles treated?

Shingles often resolves after several weeks. Treatment of the symptoms with pain relievers and cool compresses can be helpful. Your health care provider may prescribe an anti-viral drug to lessen the severity and duration of symptoms. Rarely, affected persons may experience lasting pain in the areas where the rash appeared, known as postherpetic neuralgia (PHN).

How can shingles be prevented?

A shingles vaccine is now available for persons age 60 and older. The shingles vaccine results in fewer recurrences of shingles and can make recurrences less severe and painful. People who have already had shingles can still be vaccinated to prevent future infections. Your health care provider can help to determine if you should receive the shingles vaccine.

All information presented is intended for public use. For more information, please refer to: <http://www.cdc.gov/shingles/about/index.html>.

This page was last reviewed on June 12, 2012.